U.S. TRAVEL
ASSOCIATION®

TRAVEL FUELS EVERY INDUSTRY AND DISTRICT IN AMERICA

Travel is Indispensable to the nation's economic success and global competitiveness.

> U.S. Travel Association is the national, non-profit organization representing the $1.2 trillion travel industry, an essential contributor to our nation's economy and success. The U.S. travel industry encompasses all facets of the traveler's journey—from airports, airlines and hotels to attractions, convention and visitor bureaus and the destination itself. Travel is a key contributor to America's vitality.

TRAVEL FUELS EVERY INDUSTRY

Travel facilitates commerce and business development for every industry. From manufacturing and agriculture to defense and healthcare, every industry depends on travel to drive growth, innovation, education, training and operations—and communities across the country depend on travel for their livelihood. Travel spurs economic development, creates quality jobs for millions of American workers and generates much-needed tax revenue to support critical public-sector jobs. Plus, travel has the added benefit of connecting communities and cultures, helping to enable broader perspectives and cultural awareness.

TARGETED POLICIES TO ADVANCE SEAMLESS & SECURE TRAVEL AND SUPPORT THE NATIONAL ECONOMY

Inbound International Travel

- **Reduce Visa Interview Wait Times**
  - Enact the following provisions (whether through a standalone bill or FY2024 appropriations):
    1. Authorize remote interviews over videoconferencing for low-risk non-immigrant visa applicants.
    2. Establish a visa interview wait time standard of 21 days and give the State Department the flexibility to transfer funds to consular posts with average wait times above 45 days for the purpose of increase staffing or implementing other measures to reduce visa wait times.
    3. Permanently extend interview waiver authority for low-risk visitor, worker, and student visas.
    4. Create expedited and in-country processing options for B category visa applicants, while retaining the authority to require travelers to leave the country and complete an in-person interview.

In 2019, 43% of international inbound travelers came from countries in which the U.S. requires visitors to obtain a visa to enter the United States. In 2022, first-time visitor visa applicants from the U.S.'s top inbound markets faced interview wait times exceeding 400 days on average, which U.S. Travel estimates will cost the U.S. economy $7 billion in 2023 if allowed to continue.

- **End COVID-Era Policies:**
  - End remote work privileges for the federal workforce (as proposed in HR.139) to encourage Federal workers to return to in-person meetings and travel.
  - In effect as of May 1, 2023: Eliminate the vaccine requirement for inbound international travelers immediately (as proposed in HR.185 and S.641).

  Many of these policies were implemented during the worst days of the pandemic, but no longer make sense to continue given the current environment and further, they are hurting the U.S. economy.

- **Fully fund the new Assistant Secretary of Commerce for Travel & Tourism:** Set aside $3.5 million in FY2024 appropriations for the new Assistant Secretary of Commerce for Travel & Tourism. As authorized by the FY23 Omnibus, the new Assistant Secretary will be responsible for developing and implementing a national strategy to expand the travel economy, helping to streamline government processes affecting both business and leisure travel, and helping U.S. cities and counties compete for large international meetings and events, putting us on par with the other top 20 destinations who have ministers of tourism.

- **Fund U.S. Customs & Border Protection (CBP) Staffing Needs:** Set aside at least $60.1 million in FY2024 appropriations for the hiring of additional CBP officers and training. It is paramount that all ports of entry have adequate CBP Officer staffing. Due to current gaps in CBP funding, many airports have had to shoulder the burden of funding CBP staffing needs through reimbursable services agreements, reducing their ability to invest in other areas, like airport accommodations and terminal expansions. Inadequate staffing leads to longer wait times for travelers and an unpredictable work environment for CBP Officers.

Domestic Travel

- **Modernize Air Travel:** Ensure FAA reauthorization legislation:
  1. Provides at least $50 million per year for aviation workforce development programs, which would help increase the supply of qualified pilots and mechanics. The legislation should also direct FAA to update its pilot training rules to provide additional pathways to certification.
  2. Directs the FAA to update their staffing models for Air Traffic Control to account for projected growth in air traffic demand, while also ensuring the agency has enough funding to hire needed air traffic controllers.
  3. Provides at least $4 billion per year in Airport Improvement Program grants and a rebalanced formula that provides medium- and large-hub airports a higher share of grants while maintaining funding levels for smaller airports. Currently, medium- and large-hub airports account for 80% of enplanements, but only receive around 25% of AIP funds.
  4. Extends the Sustainable Aviation Fuel (SAF) blenders tax credit through 2032. SAF is the only viable pathway to more sustainable air travel.

- **Fund Transportation Security Administration (TSA) Staffing Needs:** Set aside at least $60.6 million in FY2024 appropriations for TSA to hire additional Transportation Security Officers (TSOs). With the number of people passing through TSA checkpoints on the rise and future peak periods projected to regularly outpace past peaks, more investment needs to be made in TSO staffing and transportation security infrastructure to improve TSA capabilities and the overall traveler experience.

Workforce

- **Increase Guest Worker Visas such as H-2B visas in the FY2024 Appropriations Process:** Expand access to the H-2B guest worker program by including language in FY2024 appropriations that exempts returning workers from the annual H-2B cap. Additionally, legislation should be enacted to permanently raise the current cap from 66,000 to 150,000, while providing exemptions for returning workers and certain other H-2B workers that work for employers that previously participated in the program over the last 5 years and have remained in good standing under the rules of the program. Gaps in the travel workforce remain a significant drag on the industry, forcing travel businesses to reduce their hours, services, or quality of service. Increases in H-2B and J1 visas are needed to stabilize travel businesses, expand opportunities for domestic workers, and improve the overall travel experience.

National Parks

- **Support National Parks:** Provide at least $4.9 billion in funding for the National Park Service, which aligns with the Great American Outdoors Act (P.L. 116-152) to reduce the maintenance backlog ($1.3 billion) and ensures NPS can fully meet its ongoing operational and maintenance needs in FY2024 ($3.6 billion). Congress should also consider reforms that allow greater flexibility for parks to utilize the fees they collect for maintenance and improvements. Adequate funding for maintenance and operations is critical to both conservation and visitor access.

BACKGROUND

Prior to the pandemic, the U.S. travel industry generated $2.6 trillion in economic impact and supported one in 10 American jobs. Every region, state and community across the country benefits from travel and travel is vital to our nation's global competitiveness.

When travel came to a standstill, the absence of its contributions to spending, employment, tax revenue and a positive trade balance became evident. 3 million jobs were lost in 2020 just in the travel industry alone—underscoring the brutal impact a lack of travel has on the workforce and communities across the country. Today, the growth of all sectors of the travel economy are essential to fueling growth in all sectors of the nation's economy. Despite the strength of leisure travel, international inbound travel and business travel, meetings and events are years away from pre-pandemic growth.

In 2022, domestic business travel spending was still 27% below pre-pandemic levels and international inbound spending, a staggering 48% below. Getting all sectors back to growth is necessary for all sectors of the economy.

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